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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001382

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL TRIP TO MARACAIBO

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Ambassador traveled to Maracaibo, Zulia state June 26-27 to meet with local leaders, visit social programs, and meet with the press during his farewell visit. He called on San Francisco Mayor Saady Bijani and President of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference Monsignor Ubaldo Santana. He attended a luncheon co-hosted by three business chambers and a reception hosted by the binational center CEVAZ. The Ambassador distributed scholarships to 30 indigenous girls to study English and participated in two events with the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team. He visited the site of the former Consulate where he served as Vice-Counsel from 1979-1981. The Ambassador also visited the editorial boards of the two leading Maracaibo dailies "La Verdad" and "Panorama" and gave several press interviews. The visit achieved its public diplomacy objectives to notify Embassy contacts of the Ambassador's departure, to assure them that the USG's policy toward the BRV will remain constant despite his departure, and to lend support to the U.S. Soccer Team. End Summary.

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Local leaders  
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¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador ended his public travels in Venezuela, where he began his Foreign Service career with a visit to Maracaibo, Zulia state from June 26 to 27. During a June 26 press conference, the Ambassador announced over USD 230,000 in NAS-sponsored support for security upgrades to La Chinita International Airport, including 27 fixed cameras and 7 rotating cameras. He stressed the importance of bilateral cooperation on aviation security and counter-narcotics. Airport Director Rino Montiel noted that the new equipment will, for the first time, provide airport authorities with continuous video coverage of the cargo area and runways. The Ambassador added that these upgrades will help La Chinita become one of the most important airports in western Venezuela and the Andean region.

¶3. (U) The Ambassador fielded several questions from the press regarding increased Senate funding for the "Voice of America" and the non-renewal of Radio Caracas Television's broadcasting license. He dismissed BRV's allegations that the USG is supporting the pro-RCTV demonstrations.

¶4. (C) After visiting La Chinita, the Ambassador called on San Francisco Mayor Saady Bijani and announced a USG donation of 20 computers for patrol cars valued at over USD 93,000. The computers will relay incident-related information to patrol vehicles and thus provide faster response times. In a

private meeting before the announcement, Bijani thanked the Ambassador for the positive working relationship they enjoyed during his tenure.

15. (C) The Ambassador met privately with Monsignor Ubaldo Santana, Archbishop of Maracaibo and President of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV), and Vicario Eduardo Ortigoza on June 26. The Ambassador notified Monsignor Santana of his departure and assured him that his successor would continue to support the Church's social programs. The Ambassador explained that his departure did not signify a shift in USG policy toward Venezuela. Monsignor Santana and the Ambassador then discussed different ways to increase cooperation between U.S. and Venezuelan churches. The Ambassador offered to serve as a liaison between Cardinals in the U.S. and the CEV prior to assuming his new assignment. The Ambassador noted that Venezuelan and Colombian border city parishes often deal with similar issues and expressed his intention to collaborate with the CEV from Bogota. Following the meeting, the Ninos Cantores del Zulia, a children's choir, treated the Ambassador to a concert.

16. (SBU) The Ambassador was the keynote speaker at a June 26 luncheon co-hosted by the Maracaibo Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Industry, the Venezuelan American Chamber of Commerce (Venamcham) Western Region, and the Venezuelan American Center of Zulia (CEVAZ). The Ambassador's remarks focused on the long-standing U.S.-Venezuelan commercial relationship as well as the status of the bilateral relationship. In addition, he fielded questions on the BRV's nationalization projects and his departure from Venezuela. The Ambassador urged the business community in Maracaibo to continue to work with U.S. partners and the Embassy for the development of western Venezuela.

CARACAS 00001382 002 OF 003

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Outreach Programs  
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17. (SBU) The binational center CEVAZ hosted a farewell reception for the Ambassador on June 26. Prior to the reception, the Ambassador congratulated recent recipients of the "College Horizons Scholarship" and toured the newly inaugurated main foyer. The President of CEVAZ' Board of Directors Humberto Amado and General Director Ilse Chemaly thanked the Ambassador for his service to Venezuela and CEVAZ. The Ambassador praised CEVAZ's work and added that its services contributed to a greater appreciation of U.S.-Venezuelan ties.

18. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the Pitahaya Vocational Center and distributed "Miranda-Washington Scholarships" to 30 indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan girls to study English for two years at a local school affiliated with CEVAZ. The Ambassador toured Pitahaya's facilities, congratulated the young women, and spoke to them about the benefits of learning English.

19. (SBU) The Ambassador participated in a youth soccer clinic with assistant coaches Mike Sorber and Juergen Sommer of the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team, participating in the regional Copa America soccer tournament. Prior to the event, the Ambassador and Rafael Romero, the President of Maracaibo's Institute for Sports and Recreation, an organization affiliated with MRV Mayor of Maracaibo Giancarlo DiMartino, held a press conference and exchanged team soccer shirts. The Ambassador told the press that he anticipated a Team USA victory over Argentina and hoped to return to Maracaibo for the final game if the U.S. team advanced. Assistant coaches Sorber and Sommer practiced soccer drills with the participants, while the Ambassador donated Team USA t-shirts to the youngsters.

110. (SBU) After the clinic, the Ambassador attended a private

lunch with the members of Team USA and the coaching staff. The Ambassador and Kasey Keller, the team's goal keeper, held a press conference before the lunch where the Ambassador reiterated his support for the team. At the lunch, Team USA presented the Ambassador with a team jersey.

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Meeting the Press  
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¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the editorial boards of the two leading Maracaibo dailies "La Verdad" and "Panorama." He met with the editor and director of "La Verdad," an opposition-leaning paper and the second largest daily in Maracaibo, on June 26. The Ambassador discussed the lack of transparency behind Venezuela's arms purchases, his Senate confirmation hearing, and the natural U.S.-Venezuelan commercial relationship. Regarding the public warning issued by the Department during the Copa America, the Ambassador said the Embassy has a responsibility to inform American citizens of events and security concerns in the country. He also outlined the need to work with the BRV on practical issues, such as civil aviation, terrorism, and extradition.

¶12. (SBU) The Ambassador met with "Panorama's" Board of Directors on June 27. "Panorama" enjoys the widest circulation in western Venezuela and has a pro-government editorial tendency. The members of the Board indicated they would be more centrist (less pro-government) in the future. The Ambassador, sporting his Team USA jersey, discussed his departure from Post, the BRV's nationalization projects, the anti-Castro militant Posada Carriles, and sustained that his departure did not indicate a shift in the USG's policy toward Venezuela. "Panorama" covered the two-day trip extensively, however, they also gave considerable attention to Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez' response to the Ambassador's comment's on Posada Carriles.

¶13. (C) Juan Carlos Fernandez, a well known local journalist and former International Visitor's Program participant, interviewed the Ambassador on the Day of the Journalist, June 27, for the morning television show "A Punto." The Ambassador discussed RCTV's closure, recent student protests, and freedom of expression. The Ambassador noted the need to establish dialogue with the BRV based on issues of mutual interest, similar to the U.S.-Russian relationship during the Cold War.

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CARACAS 00001382 003 OF 003

Re-Opening the Consulate  
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¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador paid an ad-hoc visit to the site of the old Consulate where he served as Vice-Counsel from 1979-1981. The Ambassador outlined the history of the U.S. Consulate in Maracaibo, and subsequently fielded questions from by-standers and the press on its status. The Ambassador stated that the USG requested that the BRV re-open the Consulate over a year ago but we have yet to receive a response. The Ambassador lamented that Maracuchos (citizens of Maracaibo) have to travel to Caracas for consular services when the same services could be offered in Maracaibo. The Ambassador noted that the BRV currently has nine consular offices in the United States.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) The two-day visit achieved its public diplomacy objectives to notify Embassy contacts of the Ambassador's departure and to assure them that the USG's policy toward the BRV will remain constant despite the arrival of a new Chief of Mission. The trip also lent support to the U.S. Soccer

Team and Embassy-sponsored social programs. The Ambassador's farewell trip generated significant press coverage in both regional and national media.

116. (C) The Ambassador did not clear this cable.

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